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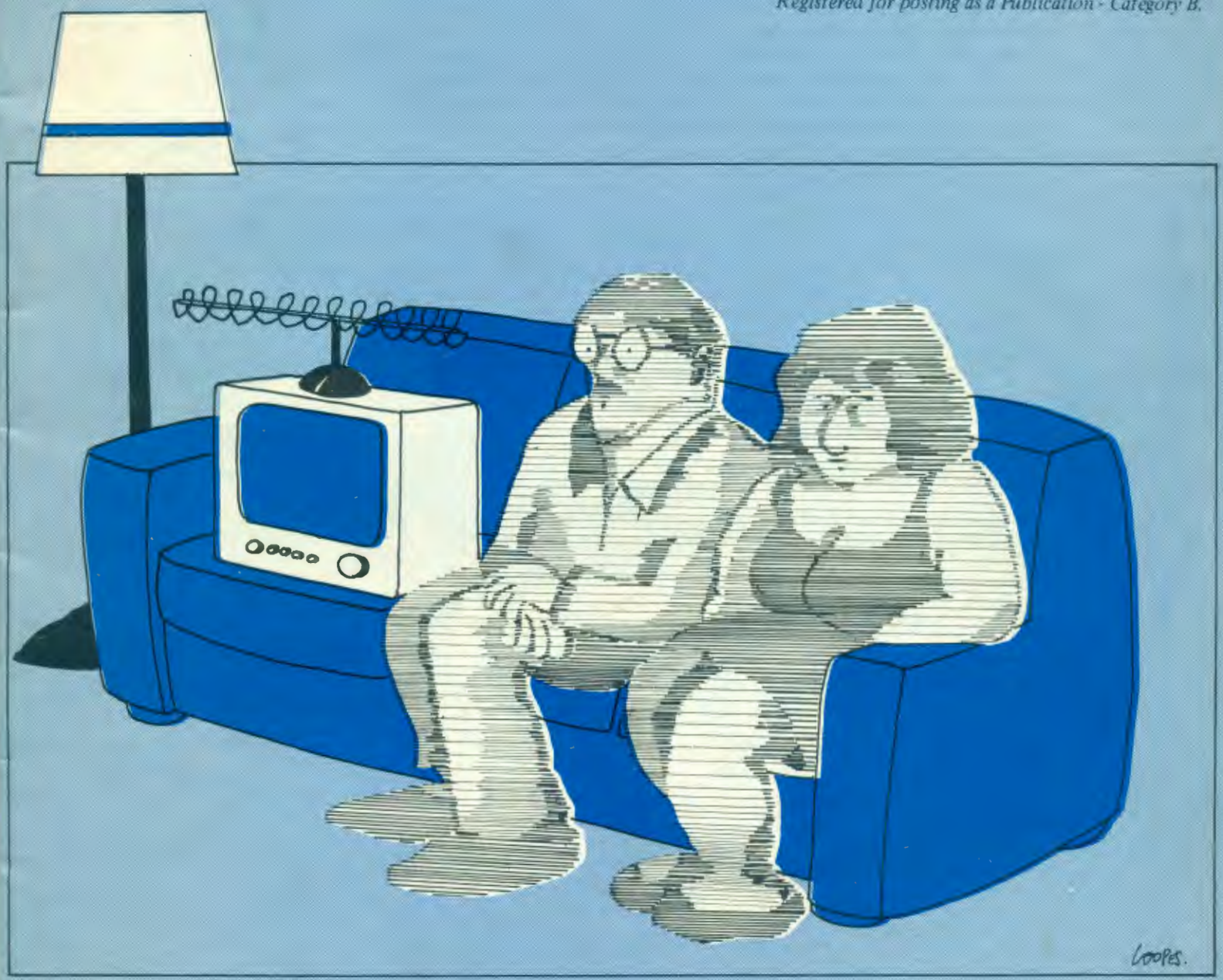

IN THIS ISSUE:

CABLE TV SPECIAL

P.O.V

What shape for our community TV system?

At present there is a two-tier system of television broadcasting – ABC and commercial. There are proposals that this should also become a three-tier system with the addition of public broadcasting television.

While it is desirable that public broadcasting television be introduced, what is not so desirable is that it repeat and incorporate the failures of public broadcasting radio.

What crippled and continues to cripple public broadcasting radio is the lack of co-operation between potential and actual public broadcasting operators. From the very beginning the public broadcasting movement has sought to maximise the number of licence holders, on the assumption that everyone who wanted a licence could be given a licence.

This assumption has been relatively true – relative to the number of frequencies that have been made available. But, in the long term, the assumption is short-sighted, for with increasing and accelerating demands for licences eventually there will be an end to the available frequencies. Without cable, there is a limit to the number of frequencies. And, of course, this is all aside from the question of why and for what purpose is it necessary and desirable to have a proliferation of frequencies?

There are many people in the public broadcasting movement, as exemplified by the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia, who are blind to the long-term consequences of this insatiable theory. There is an argument, for example, that the diverse groups seeking public broadcasting licences in Sydney are not competing with each other. The assumption behind this claim is that the different applicants are seeking licences for different geographical areas. The potential public broadcasters refuse to consider the possibility that a limited number of licences will be made available for the whole of the Sydney area, possibly restricted to specific geographical areas, and that not enough licences will be made available to enable each of the geographical areas to obtain a licence.

If pressed, however, the public broadcasters would assert that this is beside the point because there are sufficient frequencies and that what the public broadcasting movement should do is to continue to push for the maximum number of licences by virtually denying there is a scarcity of frequencies. Once again, however, while there is not a short-term shortage there is a long-term shortage.

For as long as public broadcasters assume an infinite number of frequencies, this assumption provides a justification for the survival of the fittest. In Melbourne, for example, the situation is very different from that in Sydney and potential applicants would prefer Melbourne-wide licences, and so the competition is much more real than in Sydney. Nevertheless, many in the public broadcasting movement would argue that all applicants should receive licences.

This strategy, in all probability a justification for parochialism and selfish power pursuits, depends for its justification on success, and that means all potential licence holders eventually receiving licences. If this does not occur, then, no doubt the successful licence holders will be sympathetic and encouraging while those who miss out could easily become discouraged and lose interest. This would suit those who award licences and those who receive licences.

But this makes the allocation of radio frequencies a power game subject to ad hocracy, opportunism and favoritism. This is precisely the process by which the Labor Government awarded 12 licences to tertiary institutions in 1975.

Of course, the control of the airwaves is a power issue. But those who allocate, seek, obtain licences tend to minimise the role of politics and power in broadcasting. To do so, however, is a dangerous deceit. It is a dangerous deceit because those who seek to clarify the politics of broadcasting are accused of bringing politics to broadcasting when they are trying to introduce a different and broader politics.

The public broadcasting movement needs to accept that there are a limited number of frequencies and it is not necessarily desirable that all available frequencies be allocated. Up to the present, this has not been accepted by public broadcasting radio. It is not too late for it to be accepted by public broadcasting television.

Public broadcasting television is very much in the embryonic stage. There is a chance, then, that it is possible to avoid the political mistakes of public broadcasting radio. This will be difficult because the same opportunists in public broadcasting radio could quite easily transfer their politics into public broadcasting television.

The effect of many groups holding many licences is political dissipation and, in effect, ineffectiveness. It means that groups will be preoccupied with defending their own licences even when the licences of other groups are under challenge or withdrawn. In contrast to this, the theory and expectation have been that the more public broadcasting radio stations there are the more the public broadcasting movement will be able to extend and defend itself. In practice, there has been very little indication that the public broadcasting stations are willing to act collectively or to defend individual stations other than their own stations.

A further point, then, is the need to avoid political dissipation and ineffectiveness. In public broadcasting television this suggests the need for a few stations rather than many stations. To do this, however, will require understanding and co-operation between a broad coalition of groups and individuals with disparate views and interests.

Even if it were possible to establish dozens of television stations, it would be preferable that one station was established. The reasons for this are quite simple.

- *The more stations there are the more you dissipate, divide and segregate the viewing audience.*
- *The more stations there are the more you aggravate the information-entertainment explosion.*
- *The more stations there are the more you extend and stretch the imagination and resources of those stations to filling up time.*
- *The more stations there are the greater*

will be the competition to attract audiences and hence reduce content, structure and objectives to the lowest common denominator.

- *The more stations there are the more you encourage the drive to triviality, sensationalism and newness as exemplified with commercial radio and television.*
- *The more stations there are the more you encourage factionalism between stations and audiences.*

The way to political unity and effectiveness is, in the immediate present, to establish a community television network throughout Australia with a national network of stations. The advantages of this proposal are as follows:

- *Groups would have to work together in the control and operation of the station, and this would promote political unity.*
- *The community network would be a serious alternative to the commercial and ABC networks.*
- *The community network would be a national alternative and not a subsidiary series of complementary decentralised stations.*
- *Resources, time and energies would be concentrated on the community network and would maximise its reach.*
- *Only a national community network could compete with the commercial and ABC networks.*

It will be very difficult to obtain agreement on the practicality of establishing only one television station (community) in each state, but nonetheless agreement on this is the prerequisite to an effective strategy.

An immediate difficulty, of course, is the politics of such a proposal and the present conservative government would not favor a proposal that was explicitly political and saw television as a political medium. But a political medium television is, and understanding this critical fact is the basis of the whole strategy here outlined.

Opportunists and reformists would respond by attempting to defuse the politics of public broadcasting television as if it were not involved and could subsequently develop. This view, however, ignores the predetermining consequences of initial structures, objectives and decisions and avoids facing the reality that a decision to exclude politics is a political decision. In other words, politics cannot be excluded for it governs and affects all relationships irrespective of the implicit and explicit situations.

It takes courage, then, to accept the politics of television. But, then, it could and will be argued that this might be fine in principle for the sake of political purity, but that in practice it will mean no licence. This is, of course, the crunch issue. Purist politics that repeatedly have negative results will not survive as relevant politics. Compromise, then, is inevitable and necessary. But not to the extent that goals are sacrificed or deformed by compromise.

The question, then, becomes by what process is social change effected and, in particular, what factors could persuade the government to permit the establishment of a community television network. Surely the most effective pressure is explicit public concern and action which would be so strong, intensive and extensive that the government would be forced to concede or suffer the consequences of its obduracy.

The closure of 3ZZ is an example of where there was much community concern but very little action. The supporters of the stationwere unable to substantiate their rhetoric. This was largely because they had not been ideologically and strategically prepared for the closure of the station, and when the closure came their response was inept. A strategy that would have developed 3ZZ was a strategy that aimed at extending access to political and trade union groups. This had been banned from the station as a result of a decision by the ABC Commission. If such groups had had air time, then, their commitment to the station would have been stronger.

A strategy that went wrong was the supporters' reliance on the ABC Staff Association to support them. This was not forthcoming in Victoria because the Staff Association is dominated by conservatives. Yet a strike by ABC staff would have been an effective lever in persuading the government to permit the station to continue broadcasting. Instead, too much reliance was placed on the ABC – the staff and the Commission – to see the closure of 3ZZ as a threat to the independence of the ABC. In a sense, however, the closure of 3ZZ could strengthen the independence of the ABC, for while the public tolerated the closure of 3ZZ it might not tolerate similar action designed to reduce the ABC precisely because of the closure of 3ZZ. But, then, the question of the independence of the ABC is a relative question and, as the previous discussion on the ABC and 3ZZ revealed, the independence of the ABC has always been debatable and questionable.

The initial steps then are to:

a) Establish a broad coalition of community groups with the purpose of establishing a community television station in Melbourne.

b) Reaching a consensus on the structure and objectives of the station.

c) Preparing a proposal that extends and develops the structure and objectives.

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d) Invite subsequent primary groups to join the broad coalition.

In the same way that a diverse collection of groups have worked together on issues such as the mining and export of uranium and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, it should be possible to establish a broad coalition. Such groups would include the Australian Democrats, the Uniting Church, the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party, the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), individual trade unions, the VSTA, the VTU, the TTAV, Justice in Broadcasting and so forth.

The groups need to be convinced of the fact that there is more benefit for each individually from working together than working separately. Working separately means competing for a few licences in a process of winners and losers instead of recognising that all could benefit instead of some.

Having established such unity does not mean, however, that the coalition's proposal and a licence would be automatically forthcoming. It would be a mistake to assume that the Government could be persuaded by logic and rationality. What would and could persuade the Government is the weight of numbers and influence and the disadvantages to the Government of not awarding a licence.

The Government will attempt to undermine the coalition by a process of divide and conquer, such as suggesting licences could be offered to certain groups, and such diversions will need to be resisted. Once the coalition allows itself to be bought off the strategy fails irreversibly. This is why clarity and agreement at the beginning are an essential prerequisite to success.

To recapitulate, political explicitness is a primary determinant and requirement. There is a need to eschew opportunism and reformism that assumes that through cleverness the politicians and the bureaucrats could be outmanoeuvred. While this is a short-term possibility, what might seem to be a short-term victory could in the end be a long-term defeat. There is fear of explicitness if not for any other reason than the fact people are conditioned not to be explicit.

While explicitness compounds and confuses the opportunity and chance of success in the short term, in the long term it expediates success. Explicitness means that there is no doubt about what is being proposed and the relationship between theory and practice is carefully explained and detailed. This minimises the kind of misunderstanding that has subsequently occurred with the community radio station, 3CR. Proponents of the station correctly insisted that groups and individuals considered to be anti-working class would be barred from access to the station. The response to this by many member groups was that this was a slogan and not much else and little consideration was given to its meaning and significance. Neither the originators of the station nor member groups cared or desired to spell out the consequences of such a policy. The consequences are, quite obviously, that groups considered and defined to be anti-working class are denied membership and air time. But the dispute is not over the proposal or the banning, but rather who considers and defines, and the criteria for consideration and defining. As a consequence, there have been disputes as to whether or not a group is anti-working class or not, and member groups have divided on whether or not certain groups should be permitted membership and programmes.

Explicitness in itself stems from an integrated and consistent ideology. Without such an ideology explicitness is valueless. A media perspective of necessity must stem from an ideological perspective which is a view of society, people and institutions and their relationships. The media, then, is seen as reflecting and reinforcing certain ideological beliefs, expectations and assumptions. But, then, people do not care for ideology. This is for many reasons. Primarily because they baulk at the complexity of an ideological understanding, for it provides an explanation and a meaning which necessitates de facto action. But also because it does not pay to have an ideological view and there are implicit and explicit penalties for holding the minority and outside ideological view. Penalties that are real and serious. This process is deformed through the liberal ideology that denies it is an ideology. In the case of the media, for example, it is seriously argued that it is possible for the media to be impartial and objective. The media is criticised for its bias as if bias could be rectified, when it should be criticised for pretending to be unbiased and should be encouraged to be explicit rather than implicit in its bias. The bias of **The Australian**, the Channel Nine network and **The Bulletin** are relatively more explicit than most other newspapers, radio and television stations throughout Australia. The advantage of this is that the public becomes more conscious of the bias than it would if the bias was more subtle, implicit and dangerous.

It is simplistic of the former editor of **The Sydney Morning Herald**, J.M.D. Pringle, to argue that objective reporting is difficult but not impossible and that "if you once abandon the attempt to discover the truth, to establish the objective facts of any dispute, you are on a very slippery slope indeed". The impartiality and objectivity the liberal writes and speaks about is within the liberal ideological framework. Sadly, the liberal does not understand that the liberal ideology is subservient to capitalist ideology.

David Griffiths

David Griffiths is a research officer with the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Melbourne and a founding member of the Alternate Radio Association.

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